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SPIRITUAL THIRST - BY DR. HEIDLER (CZECH)

SPEAKER: What young people are lacking is a lasting ideal, a permanent value that would give them support in every situation of life. They do not have full confidence in their parents because the system of ideological dictatorship forces parents incessantly to dissimulate, and children discern hypocrisy. One-fifth of all 19-year-old students are weary of life. And there are two times more girls than boys who feel that way.

This nihilism is the result of non-religious and anti-religious education, the product of the anti-theist ideology directly or indirectly imposed on people at every step. Marxists, too, are beginning to realize that this cannot be enough, not even from their point of view; humanism, love of man, is of greater importance than hatred for God even so far as they are concerned.

Yet prevalent, for now, are negation, indifference, a spiritual void. Nobody can deny that therein lies one of the causes of the growing abortion, divorce, and suicide rate and the catastrophic decrease in the number of newly born children, to say nothing of the quality of education.

Mounting is the feeling of alienation and loneliness. In the society which, in comparison with capitalism, purports to liquidate alienation, people are completely helpless against being treated like matter. The new bureaucratic system has become so prodigious that man, for whom they claim all this is being done, has wound up as a mere abstract symbol. The real human being is nothing at all. It is not being done for the real human being. Real man has been made into a thing. And that's what generates this feeling of helplessness, this high suicide rate, this frustration felt particularly by youth.

This experience prompts thinking people in our country to fight for the recovery of man as a value, for him to make the best of his spiritual life as an individual. They would like to follow up to what is positive in Huss and Chelcicky--not merely to their concrete historic protest, but to their heroic moral fervor, even at the cost of self-sacrifice. From Hochhuth they are taking not his

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agitation against Pope Pius XII, or against the institution he represented, but the general question of keeping silence vis-a-vis the lie or evil, the question of being helpless to do something, say something, take up an attitude. Seeking a counterbalance to the dictatorship of technology, which has failed to accomplish the task of serving man, and to the administrative apparatus absorbing man, they realize they can find this counterbalance only in their heart, in their own spiritual and intellectual strength and interests, no doubt also in art, but in the final analysis solely in religion.

They read Dante translated for us in a masterly manner by Babler; they are aware that most of our people resemble the shadows the author of "The Divine Comedy" is finding at the entrance to hell; those are half-hearted people who actually never lived and whom both heaven and hell therefore condemn. Born of this is the conviction that every easy-going realism ends where one's own conscience begins to lose. Any discipline the state enjoins on its citizens or the party on its members has a limit nobody must transcend. It is the limit of man's conscience. What our people now see again as Huss's fundamental idea is this most topical requirement: Conscience even at the cost of self-destruction! Only the truth a man can personally vouch for can be an authentic criterion for him. If a deed goes beyond the boundary of humaneness, any explanation such as "I have been ordered to do so, I have acted in a disciplined manner in the interest of the whole" is totally unacceptable.

Today all these profoundly human experiences induce Czech and Slovak intellectuals, and plain people capable of thinking independently, to consciously link up with the major spiritual struggles of our past. Since they could not diffuse in latitude, those struggles swelled like waves upward. We have no sea, but we have stars. We are able to live fully only vertically, not horizontally. This is what our elite feels.

These are the roots of the present animated interest in Christianity and in a dialogue with believing Christians. And there is not much sense in arguing over the question whether this or that expression of this interest, or this or that article we read about it in our press, is honestly meant, whether it might be "mere tactic." Even if, in some instances, it is tactic, it nevertheless is compelled by the real spiritual thirst of a growing number of our people.

That is one of the brightest phenomena of our otherwise gloomy present. And important is that the believing Christians

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set an example of this absolute loyalty to one's own conscience, which people seeking spiritually have in mind. This means, inter alia, to insist that it is only in freedom that one can serve in a Christian way, for otherwise it is truckling. Merely being able to pin down in the concrete deeds of socialism one's own cipher of man and participate uncritically in its implementation cannot be enough for Christians. A Christian must reserve, as a condition of cooperation, the right and duty of moral criticism, the right and duty to heed his conscience more than some state discipline, and to obey God more than people.